

Our view

Go for it, Kellogg. Savings have been proved elsewhere.

## School district's boiler plan a plus

October 1, 2005

Usually, when something sounds too good to be true, it is.

But that doesn't appear to be the case with the new biomass boiler being considered by the Kellogg School District to reduce heating costs and make the district less dependent on Avista Utilities, with its ever increasing rates, for natural gas and electricity. The boiler, which would use wood chips and the plentiful wood from thinning projects in the woods surrounding the Silver Valley, is the linchpin of a \$9.5 million bond election Nov. 1 – and comes with a guarantee.

Siemens, the boiler designer, guarantees the district will realize a \$3.3 million savings over the length of the 20-year bond. The international technology company doesn't have to stray far from Shoshone County, Idaho, to provide evidence to back up its claims either. In nearby Western Montana, biomass burners are established in four towns: Darby, Victor, Philipsburg and Thompson Falls. The results have been stunning, according to Butte's Montana Standard. At Philipsburg, a new boiler caused the school district's heating bill to plummet from \$8,000 in December 2004 to \$467 last January.

In a time of unstable energy prices, caused by war, hurricane and other cost pressures, school officials in Kellogg deserve credit for embracing a creative approach to cut seemingly intractable costs of heating their buildings. They didn't invent the wheel in this instance. Darby was the first district in the Rocky Mountain West to switch to a biomass boiler, in November 2003, cutting its heating bill by 70 percent. But Kellogg isn't far behind. If voters approve the bond, Kellogg will be on the cutting edge of technology. Who knows? Soon, the wood-fueled burners could be a heating source for colleges, institutions and homes.

The Kellogg proposal addresses three significant problems: slash burning, forest fuel build-up and heating costs, which could jump another 23 percent soon after climbing 21 percent in Idaho last year. Kellogg is surrounded by wood-fuel sources, even without two U.S. Forest Service thinning projects planned to protect communities bordering federal land. Small trees, brush and logging debris provide an ongoing, inexpensive fuel source for a biomass boiler, which studies of the Darby pilot project show burn efficiently and certainly far cleaner than fall slash piles.

"When we see each fall the slash piles burning and the smoke covering the Silver Valley, if we can utilize that for the schools, that would certainly be a plus for the community," Kellogg Superintendent Greg Godwin told The Spokesman-Review.

At \$30 per ton, the wood-fuel source costs a little more than a fourth of what natural gas does. And that cost could go down if the experience of the Council School District near McCall, Idaho, is an example. Council District, which became the first district in Idaho to begin using wood for heat Friday, has already received a significant amount of free fuel from landowners involved in forest thinning projects. The same could happen in Kellogg.

Now, it's up to the Kellogg School District to embrace this idea.